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ABSTRACT

This paper suggests classroom activities to develop awareness of language and the sociolinguistic aspects of language proficiency and to help eliminate language prejudice. The exercises are presented in seven categories: (1) examination of connotative and denotative language, names and nicknames; (2) dialects and slang and the status attached to language use; (3) social variables such as topic, setting, role and attitudes of communicators, and register; (4) language variation according to function; (5) lyricism, figurative language, and expression of sentiment; (6) symbols and nonverbal communication; and (7)foreign languages. (MSE)

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Language Awareness for Multicultural Populations: Building Positive Attitudes

Jacqueline Thomas

The activities which are described below are designed to develop awareness of language and the sociolinguistic aspect of language proficiency, and to eliminate language prejudice. The aims of a language awareness program are

1). to teach students to reflect about language itself, its function, and how it works,
2). to develop in students a positive attitude to language and language learning, and
3). to improve students' linguistic proficiency.

The activities are grouped into seven different units covering the following topics: connotative/denotative language; dialects and slang; social variables such as topic, setting, role and attitudes of communicators, and register, etc.; functions of language; lyricism, figurative language and expression of sentiment; symbols and non-verbal communication; and foreign languages.

UNIT 1: WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Students study the idea of connotative and denotative language. They look at the meanings of given names and nicknames. They analyze what can be learned from names, t-shirt inscriptions, bumper stickers, CB "handles", pseudonyms, and the names of rock groups and single artists.

Activities

1. During the first class meeting students write 5 things on a piece of card which they attach to their clothing: in the center-the name they wish to be known by; in each of the 4 corners-an activity they like doing, an activity they are good at, a place where they would like to be, and a person they would like to be with. They walk around the room talking to each other.

   After enough time has ellapsed to allow students to interact with each other they return to their seats. The teacher discovers what they found out about each other and this activity helps to establish group cohesiveness and social relations. The discussion leads into why some people have written in the center of their card a name which is different from their given name, and subsequently to what you can learn about people from their nicknames.

2. Students think up nicknames for each other; the teacher types lists of nicknames and distributes to class members without naming the persons; students identify each person being named. The activity is discussed by the class after its completion.

3. Discuss names of consumer products and cars etc. and why marketing departments choose particular names. This activity can be referred back to during the unit on symbols and figurative language.

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UNIT 2: I'LL SAY IT MY WAY

Students study the idea of 1). status which is attached to certain languages and varieties of language, and 2). how language changes. They look at dialects and slang, and analyze what can be learned about people from the way they speak.

Activities

1. Listen to tapes of people speaking with different dialects. Discuss attitudes to dialects and speakers of those dialects, and prejudice.

2. Invite a guest speaker with a different dialect for a question-answer session.

3. Exchange cassette tapes with a class of students from a different area or different country.

4. The teacher makes up a quiz for students of slang used when (s)he was their age; students make up a quiz for the teacher of slang they use now.

UNIT 3: DON'T TALK LIKE THAT!

Students study the idea of social norms, taboos, and social sanctions. They analyze how speakers vary according to where they are, what they are talking about, and who they are talking to, etc. This forces them to look at social variables such as topic, setting, the role and attitude of communicators, and register, etc.

Activities

1. Students act out situations which involve conflict of roles.

   This involves a three stage process. First, discuss the situation with the students and decide what varieties of language will occur because of the nature of the situation. Second, volunteers act out the situation which must involve parents and children, or school administration and students, etc. who have a conflict of interest. Third, conduct a class discussion about varieties of language chosen, what else might have been appropriate, etc.

   A variation of this activity is a technique known as Strategic Interaction where groups are given slightly different versions of the situation. When the volunteers from each group meet to role play they have to negotiate meaning and develop communication strategies. This technique also ends in a debriefing session.

2. Students give two explanations of an incident they caused at school, one appropriate for a classmate to whom they wish to admit their guilt, and one to the principal.

3. Students compare descriptions of a football game appearing in newspapers supporting different teams.

UNIT 4: WHAT'S IT FOR?

Students study the functions of communication and the idea of how language varies according to whether it is to exchange information, persuade, encourage, complain, praise, or disapprove, etc.

Activities:

Exchanging information and giving directions:

1. Students work in pairs. Without being able to see each others' faces, student A draws a design on a piece of paper; (s)he gives directions to student B who attempts to reproduce the design; students compare designs and realize the difficulty of giving accurate directions.

2. Students videotape each other describing a hobby or an activity such as scoring a basket. Class-mates rate their ability to describe clearly and in the right sequence after watching the recording.

3. Students interview each other, then interview a class visitor; they go to the local T.V. station to watch a professional interview and analyze successful techniques of obtaining information.

4. Students write letters to a class in another part of the country or another country.

5. Take a class subscription to a newspaper for 2 weeks and analyze parts of the articles, kinds of articles, what articles are followed up on successive days, etc.

Persuasion:

1. Students debate issues of personal or social interest.

2. Students record what kinds of T.V. commercials are shown during different programs and who the targeted audiences are; students analyze the many persuasive techniques used by advertisers.

3. Students make up their own ads and videotape them for comparison and analysis.

4. Students analyze newspaper advertising techniques.

5. Students write a classified ad from more detailed information.

Be sure to discuss the way language changed according to the function it was performing at the end of this unit.

UNIT 5: THAT'S WHAT I MEANT BUT YOU SAY IT BETTER

Students look at verse and the lyrics of popular songs. They discuss the idea of lyricism, figurative language, and expression of sentiment and analyze how poets and song-writers use language.

Activities:

1. Students study a popular song, analyze the meaning, discuss choice of words, and how words and mood fit the melody, e.g. "Diamonds and Rust."

There are two versions which bare comparison one by Judas Priest and the other by Joan Baez. Other possibilities include "Bridge Over Troubled Water" by Simon and Garfunckle and "You've Got a Friend" by James Taylor.

2. Students compare a song with a poem about the same topic; students look at other poems, e.g. on of the songs about friendship above and Cole Porter's "Friendship".

3. Students study limericks and write their own.

UNIT 6: SAY IT WITH FLOWERS

Students look at symbols and non-verbal communication. They discuss how symbols are accepted by general consent and how we use body language to communicate. They analyze how things can be regarded as representing something by possession of analogous qualities or by association in fact or thought, and how a good deal of communication takes place with never a word uttered (or written).

Activities

1. Compile a list of symbols representing love, purity, danger, and God, etc.

2. Cut out advertising symbols from the newspaper for other students to recognize.

3. Discuss what you learn about someone by the way they dress and wear their hair.

4. Brainstorm about how people show fear, respect, affection, and hatred etc., without speaking.

5. Perform or watch mime or dance.

6. Play charades.

UNIT 7: IT'S ALL GREEK TO ME

Students look at foreign languages. They discuss the universality of communication and the arbitrary nature of particular languages. They analyze how different people have developed different ways of looking at the world and expressing themselves.

Activities:

1. Discuss the origins of borrowed words used by English speakers; develop the idea that some words (especially those describing food and clothes, etc.) are culturally specific and cannot be translated; discuss English words used in other languages.

2. Students come up with examples of the effect languages have on each other in a language contact situation.

3. Students attempt to reproduce the written symbols of a language with a different writing system.

4. Students learn a little of a foreign language.